

CIVILIAN SECURITY, DEMOCRACY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS



HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINES

National human trafficking hotlines, or helplines, are critical components of a comprehensive anti-trafficking response and can be a powerful instrument in combating human trafficking. Hotlines are often one of the safest and most efficient tools for callers to access emergency assistance, connect to services, and learn about available resources. They also often serve as the first point of contact for the public on human trafficking concerns. However, insufficient funding and a lack of operational protocols, personnel training and retention, service and law enforcement referral networks, and engagement from government institutions can hinder a hotline's ability to assist callers and could even place them in danger. As governments and communities explore starting a hotline, or improving one that already exists, it is important to evaluate capacity and resource levels to determine which structure would lend itself to the most effective, sustainable hotline.

Hotlines and the organizations that run them can enhance anti-trafficking efforts, but only work if the public is confident that they will lead callers to help. The quality of this help depends on the strength of the local government and nongovernmental response, as well as on the level of trust and relationships between the hotline and these partners. It also depends on how developed the service infrastructure is and whether it is reliable for caller referrals. If governments and service providers are not able to provide basic emergency assistance, longer-term care, and reintegration support, the effectiveness of the hotline may be limited.

A hotline's ability to serve its callers also hinges on its organizational stability. The amount of available, steady funding, trauma-informed responses, and trained personnel often determine a hotline's operational scope, such as hours of operation, live or recorded responses, forms of human trafficking it can address, and range of caller assistance it can provide. Effective hotlines adhere to a clear mission and well-established protocols for core staff functions, roles, and relationships to referral entities. In keeping with the practice of victim service providers, anti-trafficking hotlines should maintain strict procedures to safeguard victims' personal information to avoid placing them in danger and set clear expectations with callers regarding the hotline's role and next steps. One of the strongest indicators of caller volume for human trafficking hotlines has been whether a hotline offers anonymity. How a hotline adopts mandatory reporting requirements and clarity about caller confidentiality and reporting policies can help individuals decide if or when they feel safe contacting the hotline.

The structure and features of human trafficking hotlines often reflect the local profile of human trafficking cases and social norms. Having a strong sense of how traffickers operate, where cases typically occur, and which populations traffickers target can help a hotline to best serve the intended constituency. In addition, knowing the most common forms of communication within local communities and how reliable the telecom infrastructures are can help determine which platforms the hotline should invest in. National hotlines have included toll-free telephone lines with easy-to-remember numbers, email accounts, SMS textlines, mobile applications, online chat functions, website forms, and social media accounts. Identifying the most likely callers and their common critical needs can help a hotline determine if it should prioritize offering interpretation or translation services in multiple languages and which types of partnerships or referrals it should feature, such as shelter, legal aid, or counseling services.

NATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINE STRUCTURAL MODEL EXAMPLES

GOVERNMENT OPERATED

- » Argentina: The government's General Prosecutor's Office for Human Trafficking and Sex Exploitation (PROTEX) and the National Rescue Program, which coordinates emergency victim services, operate a national 24-hour human trafficking hotline, called Linea 145, which has helped facilitate investigations of trafficking allegations.



NGO-RUN AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORTED

- » Norway: The Ministry of Justice fully funds the 24-hour NGO-run hotline, which is included in the state budget, to connect trafficking victims who call the hotline at 22 33 11 60 with law enforcement and direct service providers, as appropriate.

NGO-RUN AND PRIVATELY FUNDED

- » Greece: An international NGO operates the national hotline and handles tips, makes service referrals, and responds to requests for information or training. While private donors provide funding and support to the hotline, the Greek government endorses the 1109 hotline and maintains close partnerships with local governments and municipalities for awareness campaigns, including free television and radio airtime for hotline advertisements, as well as police trainings.

NGO-RUN AND FUNDED BY MULTIPLE CHANNELS

- » United States: A national NGO runs the national human trafficking hotline, which receives funding from the U.S. government and nongovernmental sources. The NGO relies on its network of law enforcement and service provider partners to connect with and direct callers to the appropriate points of contact throughout the country. Callers reach the hotline by dialing 888-373-7888, texting 233733, and initiating online chats.

Equally important is identifying barriers that could potentially prevent people, especially victims, from calling a hotline. Organizations that run hotlines can shape their outreach strategy and build public trust by learning about local or cultural attitudes toward service providers and government-supported resources or reporting. Over time, national human trafficking hotlines have earned reputations for credibility through the help of partners in the field, previous callers sharing their experiences, independent evaluations, and statistics or reports the hotline publishes.

National human trafficking hotlines have evolved differently to reflect a country's unique trends or most common human trafficking cases, cultural and structural contexts, and availability of reliable resources. A number of governments have chosen to fund and operate hotlines that can offer a rapid and streamlined referral to government and community services and criminal justice remedies. Governments have operated hotlines out of different agencies depending on the intended role and audience. For example, some countries with large migrant worker populations have established hotlines within their labor ministries to receive forced labor complaints or distribute information about workers' rights and labor laws.

While government support for a hotline may increase credibility as the official reporting and referral mechanism for victims, it can also intimidate people from making contact. Especially in societies with a high rate of government mistrust, an independent hotline can provide callers a stronger sense of safety from reprisal or misuse of information. A number of governments have partnered with an NGO or international organization to develop hotlines, with the degree of government involvement ranging from providing promotional assistance, to material or personnel resources, to full funding. In most cases, hotlines run by an NGO or international organization have served primarily as conduits, relying on extensive referral networks to connect callers to services or resources.

Legislative or regulatory requirements to post information about human trafficking hotlines also can spread awareness among populations, industries, and venues at high risk for human trafficking. Proactive consultation with survivors, whether by hiring them to work as hotline staff or appointing them to participate on external advisory councils, will also facilitate the effectiveness and responsiveness of hotlines.

Where no dedicated national human trafficking hotlines exist, governments and NGOs often have incorporated anti-trafficking response mechanisms into existing hotlines for victims of related crimes, such as domestic violence, child abuse, and gender-based violence, as well as general crime hotlines. Worker rights hotlines have also fielded human trafficking calls. Even countries with a dedicated national hotline on human trafficking can establish referral protocols with local hotlines and other related issue hotlines that could potentially receive calls on human trafficking.

In addition to receiving tips, national hotlines can be a central repository of human trafficking data and can play a key role in advancing anti-trafficking efforts, assuming caller confidentiality is protected. Using hotline data to identify common trends, intersections with industries and government systems, and gaps in victim support can help the field develop targeted public awareness or advocacy campaigns, engagement strategies for current and potential stakeholders, and protocols for addressing weaknesses. With appropriate safeguards and protections, hotline data can also be a useful tool for spurring regional coordination on cross-border human trafficking trends and referrals. Regardless of the structural model a hotline uses—whether government-operated or completely NGO-run and funded—human trafficking hotlines have served as both the foundations of national anti-trafficking responses and drivers of progress within the field.